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Strategy

Power and urgency in the ecological crisis

- Features -



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The urgency of the global crisis of capitalism, particularly because of the ecological crisis, is undeniable. Answering this question requires a clear vision of the question of power and the transition to another society.

The situation is unambiguous: we are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster. [1] By 2025, we have already exceeded seven of the nine planetary boundaries. [2] This has the fundamental effect of accelerating and aggravating the entire ecological crisis. Records for global CO2 emissions and their concentration in the atmosphere are broken every year. As long as the faucet is on, the flow rate will not reduce. It has recently been observed that the capacity to absorb CO2 emissions from the oceans is decreasing. [3] The same phenomenon can be observed for forests: in 2023 and 2024, deforestation and mega-fires have reduced carbon removals from forests to their lowest levels. [4] [In Finland, forests no longer act as carbon sinks but as a source of carbon! [5]

At the same time, the decline in biodiversity is reaching catastrophic proportions. Since 1970, the wildlife population has fallen by 73%. [6]

[Almost a million species are threatened with extinction. The decrease in insect numbers is already reducing food production. It is accompanied by the massive use of chemical fertilizers in the agro-industry which is depleting the fertility of cultivable soils.

Global chaos

Moreover, we cannot analyse the ecological emergency in isolation: it occurs in an unstable global socio-economic and geopolitical context. The invasion of Ukraine, the genocide in Palestine, the US interventions in Latin America, the tensions in the South China Sea, the revolts, coups and resource wars in Africa, and so on, describe a global disorder. But on the other hand, the rise of migration, inequality, the rising cost of living, the right-wing of society, repression and violence (which have a much greater impact on racialized people, women, LGBTQIA+ people, activists and so on) show a series of accumulated, and to a large extent interconnected, emergencies that we need to respond to. Even if we look away, all of this continues to happen. Always faster, always more serious, always more irreversible. But awareness does not automatically turn into action against the ongoing disaster. The real dispute over the ecosocial crisis is not the scientific debate but the question of power. It is in this perspective that the reflection we want to address in this article is situated: on power and urgency.

The question of urgency

In such a context, doubts are logically developing about the political strategy to be adopted in order to best respond to the urgency of the ecological crisis. Indeed, the deadlines for implementing the immense transformations needed are barely one to two decades. The consequences of inaction are increasingly catastrophic. As a result, the lack of strategic certainty gives rise to varied responses, which share an awareness of urgency but adopt different and often contradictory approaches. We will analyse those exerting a certain influence in the context of the Spanish state.

The intellectuals of Spanish “green progressivism” have recently insisted on the question of temporalities to justify their political project. Emilio Santiago argues that no brake on decarbonisation is acceptable and that the left can no longer stop at ideological excuses such as inequality or the profits of large private companies. [7] José Luis

Rodríguez stresses the importance of establishing an alliance with the green fringe of capital. [8] Xan López considers that the left must put an end to its dogmas and act within capitalism as it is to strengthen green liberal democracy. [9] César Rendueles argues that the current ecological crisis transforms the legacy of Marxism into a morbid and politically catastrophic fantasy. [10]

All insist on the same point: it is not realistic to hope for the fall of capitalism to overcome the climate crisis. And from this position, they call for a green pragmatism that chooses the green management of what exists. If a few years ago they justified this path by arguing that it was in line with the times; they now justify it as the only way to deal with the rise of fossil fascism.

As for the social movements, even if the vitality of pre-pandemic climate mobilizations has not been regained, we have inherited the radicalization of certain activist sectors. Collectives such as Extinction Rebellion or *Futuro Vegetal* have used civil disobedience tactics to draw attention to the urgency of the situation. The French movement *Les Soulèvements de la terre* also enjoys a growing influence in autonomous environmental and territorial defence groups. This led to the sudden appearance of the *Revoltes de la Terrain* Catalonia. Not to mention the farmer revolts throughout Europe, which, despite the fact that their demands are not always ecological, nevertheless highlight the symptoms of this crisis.

Members of the Portuguese collective *Climáximo* question the current strategies of the movements from the prism of urgency and criticize the way in which most organizations are dodging this issue. [11] They consider that neither the progressive construction of power and community organization, nor mass mobilizations, nor concrete and realistic demands adequately respond to the urgency of the crisis. At the same time, they warn that the scale of the threat is all too often answered by the renunciation of the struggle for power and the entrenchment in local projects. They argue that “if we are to plan for the dismantling of capitalism within the timeframe imposed by climate change, we need a theory of change and a model of organization that is compatible with this task.”

They stress the importance of strengthening the ecosystem of movements and organisations committed to revolutionary rupture. The proposal is for organizations to position themselves in the mindset of a war in the face of the climate emergency: any internal strategy, tactics and processes must be effective, must use rapid training and must be flexible.

For the “green progressives”, any ideological position will be perceived as contrary to any revolutionary project. They oppose anti-capitalist positions, which they see as obstacles to solving the ecological crisis, although the results of their pragmatism are still invisible. Moreover, the misleading way in which they envisage the urgency of imposing their political project echoes far too much the famous “there is no alternative”, which legitimizes anti-democratic solutions and forgets that, without the individuals most affected by this ecosocial crisis, we will not be able to trigger the radical processes that are necessary for the ambitious transformations we need.

If we can recognize ourselves in some of the *Climáximo* positions, their consequences can only be an excess of voluntarism. In practice, it can be seen that the choice of a rapid intensification of the struggle blurs the concrete context of the movements and the local dynamics that run through them. While radicalization remains a positive consequence of the emergency, the reality of social movements continues to be far too fractured and unable to challenge broad layers of society.

We can thus observe useful proposals for the reorganization and strengthening of movements, but without a clear proposal to resolve the question of power. Subsequently, we will try to outline our response to the ecosocial crisis. We will point out some shortcomings of ecosocialist thought and develop our thinking on power and urgency faced with the ecosocial crisis.

Fertilizing ecosocialist thought

Debates on the ecological crisis in Marxist thought began in the second half of the 20th century. More than half a century of ecosocialist thought has left a valuable legacy and has played an important role in both Marxist organizations and the environmental movement. But acknowledging this heritage does not prevent us from acknowledging and pointing out certain limitations that these reflections may have had.

In the majority of cases, ecosocialist thinking has focused only on the ecological part of the debate. Some central questions of Marxism have not been approached through this prism: on the state, the crisis and the organization or transition, so the contributions of this thought must be complemented by other schools of Marxist thought. Unfortunately, such a puzzle does not generate a satisfactory and coherent result. It is precisely here that ecosocialist thought must be fertilized. The same question appears in the question of political times. There is a rich legacy of debates about political times, organization, and strategy in Marxism. But an ecosocialist rereading of the latter is still ahead of us.

Reflection on the political times and the organisation of Marxism goes back to the debates within the Second International and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Eduard Bernstein defended parliamentarism as a long march towards the gradual conquest of power. For Karl Kautsky, revolution was summed up as changing the balance of forces within the state and the growth of the working masses. Thus he relied on a passive accumulation of forces, in order to “advance patiently on the paths of power until power falls like a ripe fruit”. These conceptions placed the party in the role of pedagogue that cultivates and organizes the working class.

This is what Walter Benjamin called historical resignation. [\[12\]](#) German Social-Democracy took the side of a homogeneous and empty time, a time of mechanical progress without crises or ruptures. A temporality without events. For Benjamin, this bias had put revolutionary vigilance to sleep in the face of threats. In its conception, the strategic time of politics is neither linear nor empty: it is a discontinuous, disjointed and fractured time, filled with knots and facts imbued with meaning.

The most significant of the ruptures was that formulated by Lenin through two fundamental contributions: his notion of revolutionary crisis and his conception of the party. For the Russian revolutionary, the party is not a pedagogue that patiently stores up strength, but a strategic operator that reacts with agility to the conjuncture. The revolution must prepare by building an organization capable of acting in extreme circumstances, without being paralyzed by the slightest challenge. This is why the party must always be ready for the unexpected and prepare all fronts. As Daniel Bensaïd describes, Lenin's policy is a politics of impatience. [\[13\]](#) The policy of broken time of the Leninist strategy is a time punctuated by struggle and interrupted by crisis. In this broken time, the party acts as the gearbox of the revolution.

Do these debates offer a satisfactory response to the problem of the urgency of the ecological crisis? It would be dishonest to answer in the affirmative. Even if it is attractive, they cannot be applied mechanically to the problem of the political times of the ecological crisis.

Power, crisis and transition

We will try to outline our response via three approaches: that of power, that of crisis and that of transition.

First, addressing the question of the seizure of power seems fundamental to us in a context where ecosocial

movements constantly evade it. Whether under the influence of the autonomous movement, out of fear of reformism, or simply out of impotence and inability to imagine scenarios of rupture, one cannot conceive of a relationship with the state that is not based either on a logic of pressure and demands, or, on the contrary, on a confrontation that does not aim to transform power, but simply to weaken it.

We need to raise the question of how to transform the state in the light of the emergency. Because the idea that we don't have time to carry out major transformations and that it is therefore better to adapt and find a compromise leads us to a dead end where capitalism continues to function as if nothing had happened. Evading this challenge and focusing exclusively on the construction of autonomous spaces also implies abandoning the tools of intervention in the economy that are necessary and urgent.

That being said, what does it mean to take power for an ecosocialist project in a Western liberal democracy? Lenin's conception of revolutionary crisis was based on the duality of power and on a politico-military campaign to overthrow the apparatus of state domination. This model is difficult to apply in countries where there is a robust civil society established in the depths of society, where the state exercises a strong hegemony and enjoys a strong legitimacy.

In these territories, the debates of the Communist International formulated other models: the workers' government and the transitional approach. [14] It was observed how the social radicalization of the working class was first and foremost reflected in the reformist aspiration for a democratic government that responded to the demands defended. Under these conditions, access to government through the ballot box by socialist forces can fulfil a temporary and transitory role. However, this government will have to confront the economic sabotage of the capitalists, a growing sense of powerlessness and discouragement, as well as a growing dynamic of class conflict. Hence the transitional approach: this government can play a bridging role, but must go beyond reformist politics and strengthen radicalisation.

Workers' government, checks and balances and a transitional programme

Moreover, in a context of ecosocial crisis, the success of this strategy will depend particularly on the ability to build counter-regime institutions. These institutions are fundamental to strengthening the working classes in a context of impoverishment and an upsurge in violence. But they will also have to create autonomy and disarm the blackmail of capital, in addition to building experiments in the construction of power that do not involve delegation – characteristic of liberal democracies – and to facilitate the radicalization and overflow of contexts.

The establishment of a transitional government with strong counter-regime structures is a hypothesis that can easily be transposed to a period of ecological crisis. It is not necessary to believe in the abolition of capitalism on a global scale in the next decade to adopt a revolutionary strategy: transitional demands that significantly advance the ecological transition can perfectly well be developed by a workers' government – we mean the “working class” in the broad sense – which comes to power electorally in a moment of social radicalization. The nationalization of energy companies, an agroecological agrarian reform, the massive extension of public transport, a drastic reduction in working hours, the regularization of migrants, the expropriation of housing belonging to companies and investment funds or the end of the privatization of health. These interventions will meet with limits and sabotage, and the reinforcement of the strategy of rupture will be the only possible response. From a pragmatic point of view, if there is one thing that the 20th century teaches us, it is that a meaningful reformist program was effective only when revolution was a credible threat.

Socialist responses to crises

Secondly, what are the effects of the crisis and social mobilizations? In the broken time of the ecosocial crisis, these are central elements, appearing in various ways. On the economic front, we know that in the next decade we will face a new economic crisis. Capitalist accumulation is in poor health and, since the 1970s, the Global North has experienced a crisis every ten years. Far from leftist analyses, they do not represent a spark favourable to revolutionary explosions. In times of crisis, the capitalists restore their profit rates and strengthen their domination over the working class. Crises are not a symptom of catastrophic exhaustion, they revitalize capitalist accumulation.

Ståle Holgersen defends the idea that ecosocialism can neither escape nor ignore crises. [15] In order to avoid endlessly reproducing the same Keynesian recipes for restoring the competitiveness and profitability of capital, we must prepare socialist strategies and programs against the crisis. We need concrete action plans for the immediate management of the crisis, in order to minimize social damage and to apply class politics in the moments of shock. Essentially, it is a question of preparing for the acceleration of the class struggle, at the moment when, inevitably, it comes into conflict with profit and private property. The countervailing structures of the working classes will then play a key role, as will the ability to articulate strategies that succeed in transforming the state of mind generated by the new situation into real changes.

Social crises and leadership crisis

On the other hand, there are social mobilizations. They are developing independently of the economic crisis. The dynamics of the last century generally positioned the conflict as preceding the crisis. Joshua Clover argues that the form through which the class struggle is expressed in our period is agitation, which he defines as a form of collective action that fights to “freeze the prices” of market goods, and mobilizes more and more people excluded from the wage labour market. He observes the mass struggles around the price of fuel and transport in France, Brazil, Mexico and Haiti. [16] By examining a similar phenomenon, Vincent Bevins makes a bitter assessment of the massive mobilizations of the decade 2010-2020. [17] From the movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Brazil, South Korea and Chile, he concludes that these actions have created political vacuums, but that they have been unable to take advantage of revolutionary situations. While the mass mobilizations, without leadership, did not have the capacity to take power, the organized economic elites were able to take advantage of the power vacuum to strengthen their position.

Crises, riots and mass protests are three phenomena that will occur in the coming years. These are events that will fracture political time. The ecological emergency is directly linked to our ability to intervene at these times. If our organizations find themselves stranded or marginalized, we will have lost a decade that we could not afford to lose. Moreover, it is possible that these events will take a counterrevolutionary turn: Richard Seymour describes, through the concept of “disaster nationalism”, how the far right exploits catastrophes, real or imagined, to broaden and radicalize its social base, directing aspirations and emotions in a reactionary direction, proposing violent fantasies as an outlet for social frustration. [18] Preparing to intervene in crises and uprisings requires broadening our base, strengthening our alliances, but above all being able to read social reality in order to anticipate and build emancipatory solutions to frustrations.

What concrete actions?

Finally, what are the conquests necessary for an ecosocialist transition, based on the current situation? On the one hand, the *Soulèvements de la Terre* popularized the concept of disarmament as a defensive strategy to disarticulate

and curb the infrastructures that are leading us toward collapse. [19] This winning strategy has been able to mark the public debate and slow down certain mega-projects – even if it would be necessary to address certain tactical debates on the forms, the type of infrastructure to be attacked and the consequences on the working class in order to be able to extend this strategy. On the other hand, Kai Heron, Keir Milburn and Bertie Russell defend the construction of public-community property tools in key sectors of reproduction such as care, housing, energy or food. [20] This gives rise to an institutional framework that relies on popular engagement to meet social needs and limit the domination of capital. These tools are not the result of an ecosocialist revolution, but an approach to building popular power and advancing the ecological transition. A concrete and achievable project in which organized forces can converge.

Ecosocialist conquests must combine this dual movement between the destitution and the constituent operating on new forms of organization of the economy and society. Improving the ways in which they are combined to promote their reciprocal contributions and not their opposition.

In this case, we see how an ecosocialist organizational project can respond to the urgency of the ecosocial crisis. The consolidation and expansion of counter-regime institutions, capable of imposing transitional demands at the national level, can be understood as the conquest of tools that respond at the same time to social needs and the need to weaken the domination of capital. The dialectical articulation of the processes of social struggles and electoral victory can provide a response to the ecosocial emergency. The urgent transformation and the objective of making the popular tools gain in power are not empty projects, they must be concretely part of the strategy of mobilizing revolutionary forces.

Ecosocialism and barbarism

The debates on power, crisis and transition provide some answers to the problem of urgency. Ecosocialist revolutionary organizations must react flexibly to the conjuncture, they must put forward transitional demands, elaborate a program to confront crises, intervene in social movements and build tools of transition that satisfy social needs. They must also use the workers' government as a bridge between popular aspirations and the horizon of rupture. All this is linked to the period of ecological crisis.

We start from a conviction: there are no shortcuts, but every partial victory we snatch is important. There are no shortcuts either in the means or in the end – the seizure of political power by the working class. But in the meantime, however, we have to carry out gigantic transformations. It is unlikely that an ecosocialist program will be completed before the deadlines set for a drastic reduction in CO2. It is also likely that a pragmatic reformist program will not succeed either, because, among other things, we are already passing dangerous points of no return.

That is why the tired expression of “ecosocialism or barbarism” must evolve into “ecosocialism in barbarism”. Or rather, how to build ecosocialism in the midst of barbarism. We are not facing an all-or-nothing scenario. We are facing a volatile scenario, ever more catastrophic and in which there is no certain future. We must avoid the worst outcomes, and that is why we must strengthen our power. We know that the class struggle will intensify and that popular organization will be the only way to achieve victory and avoid backsliding.

This is essential. As we said, the far right is winning the battle for leadership from frustration to reactionary radicalization. Not including it in our analysis would be a terrible mistake. The social spread of reactionary and racist positions cancels out any partial progress in the ecological transition. The popular response to the Dana (isolated depression at high levels) in the *País Valencià* offers an example of this. [21] Those involved know perfectly well that what determined the ability to respond to this situation was the existence of previous popular structures. In their

absence, the conjunction of climate disasters and a strong far right will destroy the bonds of solidarity in communities and the malaise will become radicalized in the worst possible way.

Just like social crises and explosions, we can be certain that these kinds of disasters and attacks by the far right will happen in the near future. This is why an ecosocialist organization that takes the urgency of the situation seriously must be prepared to respond. A defeat would cost us years that we cannot afford to lose.

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